

Foreign Language Requirements for Students with Learning Disabilities

Many individuals with learning disabilities experience difficulty learning a foreign language. Learning disabilities (LD) adversely affect language-based tasks such as reading, spelling, writing, or listening in the person's *native language*. Such problems tend to be magnified even further in the process of learning a *foreign language*.

Phonological difficulties (problems with tasks involving putting sounds together and pulling sounds apart in spoken & written language) and **orthographic** difficulties (problems with sound-symbol tasks in language) have the most immediate and severe impact on foreign language learning. These types of abilities are necessary for the fundamental task of learning a new alphabet, such as Hebrew, or a new sound-symbol system, such as spelling the nasal sounds in French.

Individuals who experienced delays in learning to speak, required speech therapy, had difficulty learning to read (especially phonics), struggle with spelling and demonstrate inconsistent use of grammar and/or writing mechanics, often have serious difficulty learning a foreign language.

At the same time, an increasing number of individuals with learning disabilities are attending college. Supports and services vary widely, however, ranging from basic classroom and testing accommodations, to special sections of a foreign language, to foreign language waivers, to course substitutions.

Although federal law requires colleges and universities to provide reasonable accommodations for students who have documented learning disabilities, the range of accommodations and modifications is generally determined by each school, college or university.

Testing for learning disabilities to determine eligibility for foreign language waiver may include but not be limited to the following:

- Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT)
- Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Fourth Edition (WAIS-IV)
- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test-Third Edition (WIAT-II)
- Woodcock-Johnson/Third Edition (W-J/III)
- Halstead-Reitan Neuropsychological
- Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing-2 (CTOPP-2)
- Test of Orthographic Competence

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Evaluation for Foreign Language Waiver

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On August 15, 1997, the US District Court issued its decision in the case of *Guckenberger vs. Boston University* (C.A. No. 96-11426-PBS).

In part, the ruling held that if a foreign language requirement is *not part of the fundamental nature of the student's program*, than students with requisite documentation of specific learning disabilities should be able to substitute another course for the foreign language.

Typical Requirements for Testing to Determine Eligibility for Foreign Language Waiver

Evaluation must be conducted by a qualified diagnostician

Dr. Margaret J. Kay, Psychologist routinely performs comprehensive evaluations for learning disabled students to determine eligibility for foreign language waiver and/or special accommodations for high school and college foreign language courses.

Must assess the *current* impact of disability

The standard college requirement for documentation verifying specific learning disability is that an evaluation report not be older than three years from the date of submission.

Evaluation must be comprehensive and include:

1. Objective evidence of a substantial limitation in cognition/learning
2. Description of presenting problem
3. Developmental, academic, family history
4. Primary language spoken in the home
5. Fluency in English
6. Psychosocial & medical history
7. History of medication which may have an impact upon learning
8. Neuropsychological and/or psychoeducational test results and scores
9. Clear and specific evidence that a cognitive disability exists
10. Tests of cognitive ability, academic achievement and information processing
11. Standard scores must be provided for all norm referenced tests
12. Evidence of intra-individual differences in aptitude/achievement
13. Profile of the individual's strengths and weaknesses
14. Functional limitations that necessitate accommodation
15. Tests used must be reliable, valid, and standardized
16. Test findings must document nature and severity of the disability
17. Informal inventories, surveys, and direct observation may be used in tandem with formal tests to further develop a diagnosis and support accommodation requests

Report of assessment must include a specific diagnosis:

1. Learning styles, "learning differences," and "academic problems" are not cognitive disabilities for which accommodations are granted.
2. An explicit diagnosis must be supported by test data, academic history, anecdotal and clinical observation.
3. Findings must demonstrate that functional limitations are due to the diagnosed disability.

Report must recommend specific accommodations:

1. Detailed explanation as to why each recommended accommodation is necessary.
2. Requests must reference test results or clinical observations that support the need for accommodation.

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